

Poetic Exploration of Political and Sociological Changes in Nigeria: The “Handwriting on the Wall” from Nigerian Poets

by

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Abstract

For more than half a century, the Nigerian socio-political landscape had been occupied by military adventurists and aberrant politicians – both betrayers of the nation. The people and the country have, therefore, been on the receiving end of different uncaring governments. The onus to call these rulers and sometimes, even the ruled, to order has most times fallen on the Nigerian artistes, - a major part of who are poets. These set of writers have, for the period under review, been recorders, critics and way-showers to all involved in the development of Nigeria. This paper avers that the Nigerian poet has also gone a step further by not just writing and complaining but by also proffering ways out of the imbroglio the country has been enmeshed in by its near inept leadership. Through the various poems examined in this paper, Nigerian poets have proved to be visionaries and inspirers for the citizenry who dream of a better country.

Introduction

Aiyejina's work (1988), "Recent Nigerian Poetry in English: An Alter-native Tradition" and Sule's (2011) "Art and Outrage: A Critical Survey of Recent Nigerian Poetry in English," categorize Nigerian poetry and poets into two and three generations respectively. This paper sees this as too hasty and pre-emptive of on-going creative national works. It must be pointed out that it is too early to catalogue still-alive and still-productive creative artistes into different *working generations*. They still belong to half a century which represents just about a human life time in Nigeria where a man's life expectancy is 48.95 years and a woman's is 55.33 (IndexMundi 2013). This is also just the life span of the entity called Nigeria – as at its last independence celebration in 2012, it commemorated its 52nd year. The two papers describe Nigerian poets, like the old war-horses, Wole Soyinka, Odia Ofeimum and J. P. Clark, as still producing works. This paper posits that poets like Tanure Ojaide and Olu Obafemi, who came after, can still be categorized with them while the more current poets like Ademola O. Dasyuva, Joe Ushie, Femi Oyebode, Nnimmo Bassey, Uche Nduka, and Usman Shehu become part of the one big picture. There is an over-lap of period among these poets not only within the contemporary time they are living but also in their thematic focuses and stylistic discoveries and usages.

It is on this basis that the poets chosen for this paper have been randomly selected from across Nigeria's poetic landscape as representatives of the voice of the people. The latter are citizens who have, over-time, watched Nigeria, their country, raped by political and religious leaders (using politics and religion as covers-up). According to Aboh (2012: 2):

"Nigerian socio-political development has presented highly political subject matter for these poets, and maintaining the tradition of their predecessors in terms of voicing their incenses with government's lack of focus but with a difference in stylistic presentation, this generation of poets engages their poems as avenues to register their contempt with a system that makes them slaves in their own country."

These poets – Obafemi (2001), Dasyuva (2006), Ojaide (1989), Ofeimum (Soyinka 1975), Aiyejina (Solanke 2005) and Solanke (2008) - are regarded and treated, in this paper, as a group of one generation. Nigeria's independence is still under a century as she is just going towards its diamond age. Between them, these poets have seen the enthronement and overthrow of an elected parliamentary government, a few coup d'états, and the installation of an American-styled presidential government (and its overthrow). There was another set of military palace coups d'états and finally the fight and struggle for a just and egalitarian society against a military government that annulled a free and democratic election. It was this popular uprising, in the long run, which ushered in the on-going democratic experiment from 1999.

The poetry of these versatile but combative poets is not only historical, personal and national, it is such that entreats the people to stand, fight and acquire the type of nation they dream about. This paper examines the following six poets and their poems listed against their names: Obafemi (2001), (“Haba Habib”, “Maradona”), Dasyuva (2006), (“Compatriots Arise”, “Dancing Sigidi in the Rain”), Ojaide (1989), (“No Prescription Cures A Country Nobody Loves”, “For My Love”, “Future Gods”), Ofeimum (Soyinka 1975), (“Resolve”, “We Must Learn Again To Fly”), Aiyejina (Solanke 2005), (“And So It Came To Pass”) and Solanke (2008), (“We are”).

This paper sees this generation of poets, after the 1960 Nigerian independence, as chastisers, visionaries, inspirers and prophets of change in the country’s political and sociological landscape. Through the portrayal of their dissatisfaction with various Nigerian governments’ - military and civilian - actions, and the implementations of various wrong policies and strategies in governance, these poets have allowed the people to have a peep into what a better country could be like. Again, they have encouraged the people to look beyond their immediate discouraging environment to a future they need to struggle for and attain. Writing about poets and the Nigerian polity, Fasan (2012: 155) states: “Poetry, here, is a social form whose immediacy is pressed into the urgent service of societal well-being and transformation”.

Problems of Personalities and Groups

In treating the issues that have disturbed the Nigerian state, some of the poets have focused on the leadership of the country personalizing those involved. Dasyuva (2006) portrays former Nigerian heads of military governments like Ibrahim Babangida (in “Maradona”), and Sanni Abacha (in “Dancing Sigidi in the Rain”) while Obafemi (2001) goes international painting Habib Bourguiba (the former Tunisian dictator in “Haba Habib”): all in an effort to correct visible leadership anomalies and encourage the led to stand for their rights.

In “Haba Habib”, the dictator is warned and told to “Remember to tell the rest” of his cohort “Who trample upon the garden / They mean to nurse” to be on the look-out for revolutionaries - individuals and groups - like “Nietzsche.../, Mau Mau, / Maji Maji, / Aba Women, / Soweto’s petrels”. These groups have and continue, in various other forms and nomenclatures, to unseat ruler-dictators where-ever they are found. Revolutionaries will always overcome pain for “the pleasures of victory last”. In examining the dictatorial personality in “Maradona”, Obafemi sees Ibrahim Babangida, a former Nigerian military head of state, as a dibbler, a seller of his people and a con of a man: someone bent on personal aggrandizement to the detriment of his nation and people: a betrayer of his country to multinationals and world powers (Bamikunle, 2000: 284-285):

“Your practice to donate
This huge (Es)state
To the whiny and lets of multi-nations” (Obafemi, 2001: 46)

Like others before him, he becomes a deaf ruler because he cares not for the people. He seeks for power from the barrel of the gun to suppress the people. For him, just like Habib, “The Time-bomb ticks away”. Ultimately, he would be unseated by the people through “MASSIVE out-cry” because if he does not “HAND OVER” (in reference to his handing over power as at then), he would “Be HANDED OVER” (a negative prophecy that could happen to him through a coup - military or civilian). Reviewing Obafemi’s poetic anthology, *Songs of Hope*, Bamikunle (2000: 279) argues that these two poems:

“. . . are about dictators whose policies are responsible for the sorry state of the nation. The pictorial illustration of the section, which shows an eagle, fangs set, descending on a hapless chicken is a perfect picture of what they do to their people.”

Continuing this personality analysis Dasyuva (2006), in “Dancing Sigidi in the Rain”, looks at another past military dictator, Sanni Abacha, in the leadership saddle of Nigerian government. This poem is a no-holds-barred invective-pouring exposé on this much hated personality in the Nigerian world. One must understand Dasyuva’s allusion to the Yoruba (a Nigerian ethnic group) reference to *Sigidi*. The *Sigidi* is a clay-moulded statue that must not be touched by any type of water as it would dissolve. Sanni Abacha becomes the *Sigidi* that must, towards its destruction, dance in the rain. This leader, as a problem to his country, is egoistic, visionless, myopic and deaf to the yearnings of his people. The poet asks him to perform a dance of the fool: that which would destroy him. His government’s power, according to the poet, is derived wrongly as he is a “Usurper-General” (as he had overthrown his predecessor in a palace coup). Identical with Ibrahim Babangida, the other dictator, his people’s blood defames him as, “Human flesh, his corned beef / Running blood his *tombo*” (a type of alcoholic drink). His physical structure is a far cry from a perfect one: “With a pair of tent-pegs; his small frame / Blistered with pride on two cancerous legs.” He is a diseased man spreading “diseases” and infesting his country. The poet under-rates his mental acumen, flaying his honesty: he is “a tomboy soldier” (under-developed even in his profession); “A marionette General” (a fickle-minded person and leader easily controlled or confused); with “rotund checks” and a “bloated belly” (reflections of all he had filched from the country). This problematic of a failed and less-than-a-leader dictator is reduced to rubble when his weaknesses become glaring to the people. He is, therefore, made to dance “*sigidi* in the rain of people’s wrath!” In generalizing this extremely condemnatory and vociferous poem on the majority of Nigerian leadership, Fasan (2012: 157) asserts:

“The poetry is combative and the poet neither gives nor takes any quarter. The one single emotion that defines many of Dasyuva’s songs here is anger with the Nigerian ruling class forming the target of his satiric butt and vitriol. Biting expletives and taunts are given free reign . . .”

The picture these poems paint is that of a visionless leadership bereft of love for the people it claims to rule. Over the last fifty-sixty years that the Nigerian state had been dumped into its laps, the leadership class had continuously ridden roughshod over the people. Leaders, one after the other, had tried to better the others in the manners of looting the national treasury and the amount to pilfer from it. It had also been one failed policy after the other. These poems see the leadership cadre as incapable of ruling the country: it must gear up or be jettisoned. The concluding result to all the leadership personalities examined in the poems prophesies this.

In condemning but recommending a total change of the Nigerian leadership stratum, the poets examine another political space unlimited to personalities. The entire political class is put under the microscope but epitomized as a betrayer of the people and the nation. Aiyejina's (Solanke 2005) "And so it came to pass . . ." is a full indictment of the Federal, State and even the local (governments') leadership as operated in the country. Apart from the "one Saviour" who died (could this tentatively be regarded as a former military head-of-state, Muritala Muhammed (1975-1976), who instilled a temporary sensibility into governance but was killed in a failed putsch?), all others after him were "armed with party programmes" and went "cascading down our rivers of hope; / poised for the poisoning of our Atlantic reservoir". These are politicians (ironically "armed" with manifestoes) and military leaderships (one of which created the political jingoism of 'a little to the left and a little to the right'; this same military leadership annulled a democratically and freely conducted election that it oversaw).

The poem, "And so it came to pass . . .", advocates that the people close ranks if they are to attain any level of comradeship and revolution as amongst them are "the foxes in the family". In an allusion to the biblical Jesus / Judas' case of betrayal, these "crabs" and "ducks", who have turned shameless, need only to have their financial requests met either in local and foreign exchange (naira, pounds, dollars and others) before betraying their people: Judas' was the Jewish "thirty pieces of silver". At every political level, the people see these betrayers voted into government by them on a party insignia abandon that party for personal reasons (without consultations with their constituencies). Again, there are politicians who turn the other cheek, giving lame reasons when their constituencies are cheated out of their rights; their hands and pockets would have been 'grease' and 'lined'.

Aiyejina's poem is bleak and dark; there is no future hope for the people. There is a contradistinction as these leaders—"saviours gave us a gift of tragedy / for which we are too dumb-struck to find a melody". In their abandonment, the people continued with their personal and group struggles, hoping for survival, separated from their leaders. They had expected their communal and individual struggles to move ". . . towards harvest-circle around whose fire we would have exchanged happy tales of toil" (Solanke, 2005: 11) but to their shock, what they got was "an orgy of furious flames". This poet warns that the Nigerian nation is one indivisible whole encompassing the led and the leadership: one might not achieve without the other.

Perceiving the people will suffer the more, Aiyejina (Solanke 2005) advocates that they close rank and if possible, refuse going the wrong direction if and when led by visionless and inept leadership. Positing that the poem utilizes simple, direct language infused with imagery and symbolisms, Solanke (2005: 14) surmises:

“The tone on the other hand is condemnatory. It sees nothing good in how the people were thrown to the dogs while the leaders took care of themselves. It condemns the selfish and arrogant attitudes of the politically and economically corrupt leaders.”

This is the same general drab mood of Solanke’s 1999 International Library of Poetry’s Editor’s Choice Award winning poem, “We are”. The poet, like Aiyejina, condemns the people and their leaders seeing nothing much in their collective life:

“Our lives
a laughter in the eye of a fish
a spark within the world within” (Solanke 2008)

The poet sees a depressing future for the country and its people. It avers that all achievements can come to a naught if there is no direction and unity, especially among the leaders. For him, “we are a star spangled reaching for nothing a boxer slugging for all” (Solanke 2008).

The imagery of negativity and symbolism of lack of focus and noise are prevalent. This is an epitome of what operates in the country at all levels: people throwing up their hands in futility as the country is made to stagnate (there is more noise than progressive action).

“The hooting of the train
in the dark
the unseeing bat
in the light” (Solanke 2008)

The light and hope in Solanke’s (2008) poem is envisaged in the last two lines “All is in all / is in all”. Like Aiyejina (Solanke 2005), he advocates that the country and its populace stand as one in the face of all travails. Just like in J. P Clark’s poem, “The Casualties” (Solanke, 2005: 16), the leaders must begin “to see the face from the crowd” while the led should understand

“We fall
All casualties of the war,
Because we cannot hear each other speak /
Because whether we know or
Do not know the extent of wrong on all sides /
We are all casualties.”

Solutions by Humans and Divines

In condemning the abysmal national situation engendered by the leadership, especially, and by the people, most Nigerian poets also proffer solutions. It is not a case of writing for writing sake. Documenting the poet as a historian and a provider of solutions, Onwudinjo (1991: 63) claims:

“...the poet represents these experiences through phenomenistic construal in myth, symbol, legend, imagery, metaphor, music and other figures of poetry.”

Dasyuva (2006) in “Compatriots Arise” utilizes these. In the first instance, the poem is a like dialogue: a directive to the people, his “Compatriots”, who he encourages to “arise” and “arrest”

“Obai’s enthralled dignity /
These meadows with predator’s crown /
This holiness their pilgrims feign /
This siren of frightening convoys in daylight /
The “Area Boys” in power . . .” (Dasyuva, 2006: 54)

“Obai”, for him, is the raped mythical country, a representation of Nigeria. In this expletive-filled poem, Dasyuva labels Nigerian leadership in extremely negative nomenclature: “area boys”, “teddy wolves”, “gamblers’ congress”, “looters”, “bandits”, “bastards” and “vagabonds”. These are lost leaders who have commercialized religion, monetized politics and looted the national treasury throwing all morality to the wind. Throughout the poem, which records the leaders’ misdemeanours and high treasonable betrayals, Dasyuva advocates just one solution: “arrest”. This arrest can be through different avenues and forms: “hollering”, going up in arms and upturning the corrupt leadership from its position. The people must stand and work for a situation and time when “we insist: patriotic and purposeful leadership / Must pilot to the Promised Land this colossal Stateship.” For him, the state can be rescued but the people must act first, fast and “arrest” the leadership from all its negative frivolities.

Ojaide (1989), a trado-African / Nigerian poet to the core, in “Future Gods”, extends a hand of fellowship to the supernatural and the divines. He calls on Nigerian / African gods, Ogidigbo, Ogiso, Essi, Shaka, and the other deities to come to Nigeria / Africa’s aid. These dead warriors and deities are asked to

“ . . . rise
and with your steel
go on fresh exploits.” (Ojaide, 1989: 52)

They are no longer to destroy their people but to encourage, arm and aid them in throwing off centuries of different types of limiting shackles: political, psychological, physical, environmental, spiritual, cultural, religious and sociological. The gods are encouraged to surmount ethnic, geographical and religious biases and borders. They are to seek an egalitarian pan-Africanist environment as the people “have had enough of cannibals, emperors and generals”. Ojaide (1989) eulogises these gods. Drawing upon their past actions, he admonishes: “Let who strangled lions in their dens / wrest from our destiny our hidden blessing”. Besong (2006: 120) alludes to this extra-ordinary solution Ojaide (1989) suggests as also reflected in some of his other poems when he writes:

“Ojaide has largely been pre-occupied in *The Fate of Vultures and Other Poems* with objectifying the Nigerian and continental reality with an underlying revolutionary compass. He demonstrates a poetic sensibility that defies the original formative intention in its restless concourse of poetic ambience. The perspective from which he creates is determined by his vision of the world since works of modern African Literature as thumbprints of history are often living testimonies of their period.”

And Ojaide curses any god or goddess that fails to help his or her people. If the people worship a god, then they deserve a hand of help from the god for without a people, a god will die:

“Shame on gods who look on, bemused
as lightning strikes their devotees
in their own groves.” (Ojaide, 1989: 52)

There was a time for humans, another for the gods: it is now time for co-operation between the two - a human-divine cleansing of societal negativities of either the led or the leadership. This type of revolutionary reaction is described by Besong (2006: 122):

“There is a clamour for revolutionary transformation of society and the abandonment of the prebendal mode of ontology since the masses and their leaders are projected as the real makers of history.”

Reassurances of Future Prospects and the Extraneous

Like Affiah (2012: 288) asserts, this paper also states categorically, in line with these Nigerian poets, that the fate of the people lies in their own hands. Nobody will help them except they decide, like the poets encouraged, liberating themselves and their country from governmental, religious and sociological limitations. Nigerian poets opine that the future is bright and achievable. Their encouragements are not limited to this as they indicate the ways and manners of getting to the summit. Bamikunle (1991: 75) accentuates this idea in a collective review of what Nigerian poets, through their works, denote and can achieve for the country:

“Not only does the issue of the artist’s importance to society often come up in their polemical works, the latest example being Niyi Osundare’s *The Writer as Righter*, but the nature of this obligation has become a constant feature of the arts, particularly in poetry. From Okigbo’s *Labyrinths*, Soyinka’s *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, Ofeimum’s *The Poet Lied*, Osundare’s *A Nib in the Pond* and *Village Voices* to Ojaide’s *Labyrinths of the Delta*, the theme of how artists have tried to reform their societies and how they can, is a constant pre-occupation.”

In the poem, “We Must Learn Again To Fly”, Ofeimum (Solanke 2005) encourages the Nigerian populace that despite all that must have happened when “Some wounds cut so deep . . .”; “Some hunger grow so steep / it cuts out the sun”; “danger comes / bringing the sky low / lower than a stoop, / till our hair becomes cumulus / fathering dusk and clipping eager wings”, they “must learn again to fly”. In this poem, ‘we’, which is a repeated pronominal refrain, is in a sense a collective. It encompasses the people and the various levels of leadership. In stating the national problems, Ofeimum (Solanke 2005) sees the citizenry as having collectively undergone the various travails. To surmount these limitations, the poet opines that collectively the people must not “forget how to fly” and “how to awaken.” It is in relearning these extremely important survival tactics that the people and the country can move forward as they become skilled at overcoming travails, (personal, group and national). The assertion is, “Yet we must learn again to fly.”

Building on this theme, the same Ofeimium (Soyinka 1975) in “Resolve...”, a nine-line poem, encourages the nation to make up its mind to forgive itself and its different recalcitrant and betraying parts – humans or otherwise. In this might come forgiveness of wrongs done and the healing of the national psyche. According to the poet, forgiveness should be sought from all those that were wrongful treated, tortured, maimed, imprisoned or killed:

“To placate those the night surprised in their noons;
those we loaded with lead;
pushed to dungeons and makeshift graves;
to absolve our irretrievable selves” (Soyinka, 1975: 125)

According to Ofeimium (Soyinka 1975), the country need not wallow in self-pity and recriminations adjudging and apportioning blames: “we need no mourners in our stride, / no remorse, no tears.” The country and her people must stand fast and be focused. Minds must be made up never to allow the sorts of people, situations and circumstances that, in the first instance, propelled the country to the negativities of the past. These people, situations and circumstances must never be allowed into governing and controlling positions again. He advocates one solution and one encouragement: “Only this: Resolve / that the locust shall never again visit our farmsteads.”

The last two poems in this paper are by Ojaide (1989). We see them as extraneous because the recommendations therein are out of the general problematics. They touch the very life of the people and are the fabrics with which a country need be built with. The Nigerian nation lacks these types of balm and building blocks. Chiefly, the Nigerian wants to gain from the country without putting back. Ojaide advises against this: he advocates that the country must be loved not just for its geographical name and border limitations but for all it entails. In “For my love”, the poet “sings” for Nigeria, his “love”. According to him, countries like France and Cuba had their people, “Bastille folks” (in reference to the start of the French Revolution in 1789 when the Bastille prison-fortress was stormed), and leaders, “Castro” (in reference to the former Cuban communist president, Fidel Castro) shake “off the incubuses on their backs”. He enlists the people to make the change now as “Here is the hour”. For him, everybody is needed and capable: all hands must be on the deck - “not transference of duty to those / worse-equipped than us in time to work up the wonder”. He envisages and, therefore, encourages all to work towards that one day when things will out well and the people will be satisfied with on-goings in the country: “I sing of the moment with its own warriors angered / by a million abuses of freedom, of human love; / I sing of this day with its arsenal of a common will” (Ojaide, 1989: 9).

The last poem, “No prescription cures a country nobody loves”, illustrates the main thrust of this paper. Ojaide (1989) itemizes acts of valour, love, care and patriotism exhibited by individuals: “a nameless schoolgirl from Ojojo, Warri / surrender her recess-rice coin to a beggar”, “driver who rescues his van from a treacherous puddle, / then stops to plant there a red flag”. These acts create “fellowship that deserves universal membership / this rarity gladdens the heart”. Ojaide (1989) advocates the universality of humankind: patriotism of the self-in-all-others in a multi-cultural, multi-tribal and multi-religious country like Nigeria. The citizens should love their country and show it because no country will develop, if it is not loved by its people: it must be cared for and “proudly loves [sic] as an inseparable flesh”. Writing in a paper titled “Exile, Exilic Consciousness and the Patriotic Imagination in Tanure Ojaide’s Poetry”, Tsaiior (2011: 103) postulates that a Nigerian or any human should be comfortable to live anywhere in Nigeria or in any part of the world (whether on exile or in free will): “In Ojaide’s poetic imagination, therefore, home is exile and exile home hence it no longer matters where you live”.

In this fullness of living and loving wherever one is, Ojaide (1989), like the other reviewed poets, suggests the following virtues be present in the lives and actions of all humans, Nigerians especially: kindness, co-operation, unity, oneness, care, thoughtfulness, “universal membership”, and fellowship. The resolve must always be not to allow the negative to control the nation and its nationals but if this happens, then it must be ousted - either from the leadership or the led.

Conclusion

Nigerian poets, across a span of some fifty to sixty years of the life of the nation, have served as recorders, censures of wrong doings and advocates of change, especially in the appalling situations and circumstances the country has found itself. This paper has shown that the country’s various levels of leadership have not done well with her. The onus to call the leaders and the people to order has partly fallen on creative writers and the artistes, especially the poets. In all the poems examined in this paper, the country - the led and the leaders - has been encouraged to retrace wrong steps taken since independence. This retraction should be without rancour and recriminations. According to the poets, the nation should make up its mind to forgo the past and construct the future on better and positive formative and building blocks. The future can be bright should their identified short comings be considered for introspective analyses to reclaim the lost goodness of the Nigerian National status.

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